

Instance: The Fragmented Stage of Virtuoso (working title)⁴³

Peter Petralia

With specific reference to *Virtuoso* (working title), this instance seeks to illuminate my company Proto-type Theater's 'both-and' approach to fragmentation in a practice which otherwise affords wholeness. It looks particularly at live co-relations of actors with each other and the audience, simultaneously in stage space and screen space – with these distinct spaces and media in necessary inter-relation. As science constantly miniaturizes and reduces the world into its component parts, we have become capable of seeing the material world both as unitary particles and as joined together. In contemporary culture it is hard to imagine life without screens that isolate aspects of experience. We use them as a communication tool, for entertainment and as barriers to human contact. In *Virtuoso* (working title), television screens fulfil all these functions, but they also act as a membrane that separates performer from audience member while simultaneously bringing the fantasy of the piece's fiction – and indeed the performers themselves – closer to the audience.

Along the front edge of the performing area are three black, flat-screen television monitors, facing the audience. Behind them is a white taped-out square, within which are a variety of scenic elements, properties and cameras. Four live-feed video cameras are connected to the three flat-screen television monitors⁴⁴ and, during the course of the eighty-minute performance, three performers arrange and rearrange the materials within the space to create a series of increasingly complex shots for the cameras, and by default the televisions. The live audience witnesses both the creation process that happens in the theatre and the images that the performers create on the television monitors. The space the performers work within (the area behind the screens) is arranged like an abstracted, live television soundstage, with mapped-out spaces that represent particular fictional locations within and around a suburban home (represented on stage and on screen by a doll's-house). When developing the piece, the company was drawn to the photography of Gregory Crewdson, famous for his decadent, colour-saturated photographs of suburban America vividly capturing often-private domestic moments. His images depict complex stages surrounded by lighting equipment and cameras; within the centre of the stage everything is perfectly ordered but around the edges a chaos of equipment reins. This juxtaposition became a central inspiration for the visual aesthetic of *Virtuoso* (working title) and as a result all of the on-stage action takes place within the taped-out space behind the televisions.⁴⁵

When the audience enters the theatre, the three performers (Mark Esaias, Gilian Lees and Andrew Westerside) are within the taped area, and popular music from the 1960s plays through the theatre speakers. The television screens do not

relay any images; they are black. Gillian, Mark and Andrew are odd figures whose oddities become more pronounced upon examination: they each wear wigs, and Mark wears only a yellow button-up short-sleeved shirt, underpants and slippers. The obviousness of their wigs is one of many devices used to create the theatrical wonderland that *Virtuoso* (working title) explores on stage, calling immediate attention to the constructed nature of the performances (← TERM: TRANSPARENCY). The wigs also relate to source materials that were explored in rehearsal, most explicitly the film *Grey Gardens*, echoes of which abound throughout *Virtuoso* (working title) without being made explicit.⁴⁶ The three performers smile at the audience, apparently enjoying the kitsch music. Once the audience has settled, the music fades out, the lights shift, and the performers stand up and prepare the stage.

They turn on the cameras that are positioned around the space before moving to the doll's-house far upstage centre. They place themselves around the house, although what they are doing is not immediately apparent. A soundscape starts playing at the same moment that Andrew opens the shutters on a camera focused on the door of the house. This image is transmitted to the three television screens. A five-minute sequence follows during which the audience sees the saturated miniature world of a doll's-house being filled with furniture by an oversized hand (Gillian's). Gillian's hand on screen is out of scale with the tiny furniture that fits into a realistic arrangement, and this is exaggerated by an eerie soundscape made up of household noises that have been processed and stripped of their context.⁴⁷ The camera pans, zooms and repositions itself until a complete kitchen is compiled in the doll's-house and on the television screens. At the end of this sequence, Gillian walks to the downstage edge of the stage and turns on an LED flashlight that she aims at her face, where she speaks directly to the audience (and to herself), not on camera. She is recalling a dream that sets up a number of themes that are replayed and rehearsed throughout *Virtuoso* (working title), most notably, to paraphrase David Lynch (Chocano 2008), the notion of the house as a place where things can go wrong.

The performance thereafter is structured as a series of fragmented scenes between Andrew, Gillian and Mark staged for the cameras and involving a game of playing house where the rules are constantly shifting, but where the dangers of the outside world seem always to offer threat or seduction, depending on the performer's perspective. The game-playing evolves throughout the performance, drawing inspiration from the endless game-playing that the two Edies busy themselves with in *Grey Gardens* while their house literally falls down around them. These scenes are technically complicated and require the performers to stand in awkward positions, to face left or right to camera in order to affect the proper directional looks between the three screens, and to place the cameras/backgrounds in precise positions without substantial preview to ensure the shots are correct. When a performer is speaking to another performer, they speak via the

screen, turning to face the other performer in the place that they are on screen. This means that sometimes the live performers who stage these images are standing next to each other (or indeed, nowhere near each other) but not facing each other in the live space, thereby disturbing the conventions of naturalistic performer interaction.



Fig 1.: Virtuoso (WorkingTitle) The television screens offer contrasting angles amidst a chaotic theatrical landscape (Photo © Proto-type Theater LTD)

The scenes are broken by sequences at the doll's-house where the furniture from one room is removed, the camera repositioned and new furniture placed in a new room (indicating a shift in time/space) all by the articulate hands of the performers which seem to offer varying commentary on the objects via their subtle muscular shifts. For example, in the first instance of setting up furniture at the very beginning of the piece, Gillian's hand moves slowly and contemplatively into the doll's-house (and thus the frame of the camera/television), sometimes stopping midway in her task to make a small adjustment or to use the side of her finger in an overly delicate manoeuvre. Later, Mark dumps the entire contents of a room into the frame and then sorts out their arrangement. This progression of approaches to the doll's-house furniture tracks along a similar path to the narrative destruction that is occurring in the piece: a general weariness with 'playing

the game' and a desire (on the part of Andrew and Gillian) to end the game entirely that is accompanied by a growing awareness of the fragility of their own fiction. These sequences are a play of scale where objects on stage are loosely represented by objects in the doll's-house. In the live space, the doll's-house is a doll's-house, but on screen it is also a representation of a fictional scenic world.

A series of soliloquies (as in Gillian's first speech) that further the narrative and reveal the inner thoughts of the characters break the flow of the camera-play in *Virtuoso* (working title) since they are never delivered to camera. Structurally, they function to alter the pace of the performance and allow narrative progression. While one performer delivers a speech, the others are on the fringes of the visual space, listening in. In one speech, Andrew describes his desire to be John F. Kennedy before detailing his sexual exploits with Mark and Gillian. This revelation encourages a flirtatious exchange between the three that is only visible off-screen in the live space. Later, Gillian describes her journey out of the house to the edge of the subdivision where the forest lies, which ultimately results in an end to the game-playing in the subsequent scene. These interactions extend the fragmented narrative offscreen, creating a narrative tension with the televised scenes that places the screens firmly in the context of a live performance.

In *Virtuoso* (working title) the actions of the performers are duplicated and fragmented – they can be seen live and (generally) on the screens simultaneously. The performers are also, of course, fragmented on the screens themselves; their full bodies are never completely revealed in the shots being staged. The cameras work as a kind of microscope, focusing in extreme close-up on mouths, eyes, feet and hands or cutting off a performer's body halfway. This invasive operation of zooming into the minutiae of the performer allows us to see their pores, their structural components, much like an Adobe Photoshop image that has been magnified to several hundred percent its original size. When Mark asks to be kissed by Andrew in a scene near the climax of *Virtuoso* (working title), he approaches the camera until only his lips are in view. At such a close perspective, his lips lose their relation on screen to a face. It is only by raising your gaze to see Mark standing in front of the camera that the lips make sense. The viewer may know implicitly that the lips are Mark's but the seduction of the close-up makes them also simply colour, form, shape, and texture.

But the process of fragmentation does not end in this one-way exchange from live to screen: the macroscopic lips are out of scale with the image on the centre screen (of Andrew seated on the floor next to a chair, shot from a steep top angle) and in conflict with the other onstage performer (Gillian, who watches from centre stage, encouraging Andrew to kiss Mark). As is often the case in *Virtuoso* (working title) there is a multiplicity of image scales (both live and on screen) that creates a visual tension for an audience member: the eye of the spectator is delivered images, bodies and objects whose scales should preclude them from sharing a singular space. What we each see when we look at *Virtuoso* (working title) will un-

doubtedly vary depending on how we look, but there is a possibility for the spectator who takes in the *whole* scene, both on screen and not, to unify the stage in a fragmented image whose component parts are laid bare. By visually suturing the on-screen image with the live process of image construction, an audience member witnesses the straddling between the material and immaterial, and has agency in completing the image.



Fig 2: *Virtuoso* (WorkingTitle) The use of extreme close-ups alters the spatiality of the performance space and the depth of the screen language (Photo © Proto-type Theater LTD)

A play with identity and reality is also at work in the narrative and form of *Virtuoso* (working title). From the beginning, the narrative suggests an uncertainty of identity, with performers constantly turning to one another and asking, “Who are you?” The answer to this question turns out to be incredibly complicated as the structure of *Virtuoso* (working title) forces a confrontation between the performers (who move the cameras), the characters (who talk to us in their monologues), and the characters-within-their-characters (who are *performed* by the characters for each other). It is never quite clear who these people really are. Is Andrew, for instance, a visitor as is suggested by the earliest scene in which he speaks? Or, since he is onstage from the beginning and seen moving out of view of the live cameras until his entrance on screen, is he *performing* as a visitor? Is Mark the

Marble Faun as Andrew calls him, and have they really had sex in the back of a Buick, or is this an invention created to incite some tension between Gillian and Mark? Did Gillian really go to the edge of the subdivision? Is Mark really Jacques Cousteau?

The performers become unable to agree on the narrative, on whom they are, and even on the condition of their world. The possibilities offered by the narrative accumulate and become increasingly implausible until Mark is coerced into performing his final role as John F. Kennedy on his way to the Dallas Trade Mart with his wife Jackie. Gillian and Andrew cage Mark in a triangle of cameras so that his image appears with a scenic background on the centre camera (and television screen) while two other cameras capture fragmented versions of him that include the theatre as a background. The fragmenting of the images accompanies a breakdown of character: Andrew and Gillian seem no longer to wish to perform their roles as suburban stereotypes and see a restaging of Kennedy's assassination as the final play to end all plays. Mark has become stuck here, operating as if the narrative progression that leads Gillian and Andrew to alter the rules of the game had never occurred, and he is left as the only image on screen as a result. This sequence escalates until a series of three gunshots are articulated by Andrew, simulating the assassination of JFK and, by extension, ending the game. These shots are accompanied by the television screens returning to black.

Further complicating matters is that the performers are all British and do not adopt American accents despite the narrative of American suburbia in which they exist. In creating *Virtuoso* (working title) the question of accents was perhaps the single most debated issue. In the end, I felt that by not having American accents the falseness of the world was more evident; this is not, after all, meant to be an accurate representation of an historical moment, nor is the audience meant to believe these people are who they say they are. By maintaining their own accents, the performers strengthen the theatrical distance that the structure of the cameras and screens provide; the characters are rendered immediately in inverted commas through the maintenance of accents that would not belong in an accurate representation of American people. These accents do not belong in the narrative of *Virtuoso* (working title) except to call attention to the falseness of the situation.

In *Virtuoso* (working title) there is nothing better for the performers to do than to play at television. McLuhan (2004, 346) has said that "TV tends to be a close-up medium," where the performance of actors needs to be more nuanced. The performance style of Andrew, Gillian and Mark is simultaneously in synch with and at odds with McLuhan's statement: they do explore the close-up extensively but they also use a heightened performance style that draws attention away from the screen and back into the live space. This heightened style is a hybrid performance language that was drawn from watching early American cinema, which built on the performance style of theatre, and from watching television, which also drew on theatre. The result is a form that occasionally calls attention to itself, inviting

audience members' eyes to lift from the screen and observe the live space. This movement between the live and the screen, and back again, suggests a complex dynamic is at work bounded only by our ability to suture the fragmented images (← TERMS: PRESENCE; DISPLACEMENT).

Cognitively, this process of suturing stretches the brain's perceptive function because, as Semir Zeki has explained, "the primary law dictating what the brain does with the signals it receives is the law of constancy" (2006, 244). When we see images, these image signals are transferred to the brain and the brain processes them into meaning. In that process, the brain seeks to "eliminate all that is unnecessary for it in its role of identifying objects and situations according to their essential and constant features" (245). When the choice for the brain is simple, a solution to its stimulus happens quickly. When the brain is presented with more complex situations, or ones where there is no immediately apparent way of understanding, the brain goes through a process by which every possible outcome/answer is presented as equally correct. In essence, the brain handles multiplicity by recognizing the potential for there to be more than one way to interpret a situation: the brain does not require a single correct answer to any problem (Zeki 2006, 245).

So, when an audience member is presented with the spectacle of a live body facing a camera (in profile to the audience but visible from at least the waist up) and a screen that appears to display an image of that live body, as happens in the close-up lips/kiss moment described above, the brain knows that the image of close-up lips on the screen relates to the body in space, but it also knows that the image on the screen is equally an abstract series of colours and textures. These two ways of understanding the image are not mutually exclusive; they can exist simultaneously. Furthermore, the same "circuitry" in our brains that controls our movement also engages when we imagine movement (Lakoff 2006, 158). The implication in this instance, is that when the screened image is present at the same time as a physical presence on stage which appears to relate to that *image*, our mirror and canonical neurons engage in the brain allowing us to imagine what is happening physically in front of us by feeling "what it would be to perform that motion"; a transference occurs between the physical body of the performer and the body of an audience member via the screen (Lakoff 2006, 157). Hence *Virtuoso* (working title) is at once fragmented and coherent, though it eschews the realist disposition to make sense of the fictional world it constructs.